

Social Media Age Restriction and Young People

OUR POSITION:

Bravehearts recommends a proactive approach to the implementation of the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024*, encouraging:

- Ongoing scrutiny and research to ensure these changes support child safety without unintended consequences.
- Review of whether entering social media at 16 fosters healthier usage patterns, critical thinking, and digital citizenship.
- Platforms to embrace Safety by Design principles, using these changes not merely to restrict access, but to reimagine systems that actively protect and empower children online.
- Efforts to hold companies responsible for users' safety, placing a duty of care onto digital platforms for the wellbeing of their users.
- Focus on digital literacy and good digital citizenship education to help develop skills that are needed to ensure positive and safe online practices.

Background

In response to emerging concerns about youth exposure to harmful content and risks such as cyber-bullying, screen-time overload and social comparison, the Australian Government introduced the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024*, which mandates that certain social media platforms take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under 16 years of age from holding an account (Australian Government, 2024a). This legislation will be in force from December 10, 2025.

Young people's engagement with social media has become nearly ubiquitous, shaping their social, cognitive, and emotional interactions. Surveys indicate that most adolescents in developed countries use at least one social media platform, with some reporting 'almost constant' connectivity. In Australia, for example, a recent report found that among young people aged 8-17 years, 97% used social media daily and nearly 40% spent three or more hours online each day (La Sala et.al., 2025). This widespread uptake has prompted the examination of how much young people are using social media, how they are using it and what the implications might be for their development and well-being.

Young People and Social Media

Young people's adoption of social media is wide-spread and understanding why they use it is essential for grasping both its opportunities and risks.

A recent eSafety Commissioner reported that 95% of 13- to 15-year-olds surveyed used social media in 2024. Most popular services: YouTube (73%), Snapchat (63%), TikTok (62%), and Instagram (56%). Facebook and Discord saw moderate use among children aged 13 to 15 (41% and 27%, respectively), with lower engagement on Twitch (12%) and Reddit (8%) (eSafety Commissioner, 2025).

The 'why' behind usage is multifaceted. One major driver is social connection: adolescents often use social media to maintain friendships, participate in peer groups, and to feel part of a community. Additionally, identity formation and self-expression are central; platforms provide young people with opportunities to explore interests, experiment with how they present themselves, receive feedback from peers, and align with groups (Weir, 2023). Access to information and entertainment (such as video content, live streams, memes, and interactive challenges) helps satisfy emotional, cognitive and diversionary needs (Rubenking & Strawser, 2023; Weir, 2023). Together, these motives illustrate that social media is deeply embedded in young people's daily routines, serving as both a social lifeline and a leisure environment.

Recognising the underlying drivers of young people's engagement online is important, the nature of young people's engagement, not just the amount of time spent online, influences whether the effects are predominantly beneficial, neutral or harmful (La Sala et.al., 2025). Understanding why and how young people use social media provides a critical context for evaluating opportunities for support and development, and the challenges of regulation, digital literacy and wellbeing.

Impact of Social Media on Wellbeing

Research indicates that heavy use of social networking platforms and image-based apps is associated with lower psychological wellbeing among young people. For example, one large dataset found that adolescents who spent five or more hours per day on digital media reported worse psychological wellbeing compared to light users (less than one hour) (Twenge & Campbell, 2019). A systematic review of social media use among adolescents found that social media offers both risks (such as increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, and sleep disruption) and opportunities for connection and support (Falcón-Linares et.al., 2023)

The nature of the social media engagement (for instance, active versus passive use, private versus public sharing) can moderate these impacts. Research suggest that it is not simply time spent online, but how young people engage with social media, the content they encounter, and their broader offline context, that matter for wellbeing (Valkenburg et.al., 2022; Van de Castele et.al., 2024).

It is important to recognise that the evidence remains nuanced and suggests that social media use is not uniformly harmful; rather, it presents a complex interplay of risk and resilience factors. Recent reviews highlight moderate benefits of social media for youth wellbeing, particularly when it facilitates social connection, peer support, and access to help resources for isolated or vulnerable youth (Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku, & Greenshaw, 2025). From a policy- and practice-oriented perspective, this implies that interventions aiming to safeguard young people's wellbeing should emphasise promoting healthy patterns of use (e.g. encouraging active, supportive interactions over passive consumption), fostering digital literacy, and addressing broader contextual factors (such as sleep, offline social support, and self-regulation) rather than simply mandating usage limits.

Age Restriction and Social Media

The *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024*, which amends the *Online Safety Act 2021*, introduces a minimum age requirement of 16 years for what are defined as 'age-restricted social media platforms' for Australian users.

From December 10, 2025, providers of these platforms must take ‘reasonable steps’ to prevent Australians under the age of 16 from having accounts. The law also contains privacy safeguards, requiring that any data collected for age-assurance purposes must be handled and destroyed according to specified requirements. The enforcement regime affords the regulatory body (Office of the eSafety Commissioner) powers to collect information from service providers and apply penalties to companies that fail to comply.

Among the key benefits of the Act are its clear shift in responsibility from parents and young users towards the platform providers themselves, which arguably recognises the structural nature of many online risks. The government emphasised that the measure “places the onus on platforms, not young people or their parents, to take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under 16 years of age from having accounts” (Australian Government, 2024b). This could lead to stronger age-check systems, improved moderation of content, and better overall protection of very young users who are considered particularly vulnerable to harms such as cyber-bullying, excessive screen time, advertising targeting, and exposure to harmful or misleading content. The long-term aim is to reduce risk at a developmental stage where children’s psychosocial and cognitive capacities are still forming. Further, by legally recognising social media platforms’ ‘social licence’ and codifying their duty of care, the law may drive platforms to invest more in safety features, age-assurance technologies and privacy protections (for example by restricting how age verification data may be used or retained).

However, the Act also draws several criticisms and concerns. The broad definition of ‘age-restricted social media platform’ has been flagged by the Law Council of Australia (2024) as “extremely broad and likely to bring uncertainty to its application”.

One concern has been the question of practical enforceability: how will platforms reliably verify a user’s age or location and prevent under-16s from accessing accounts given that many current systems are easily circumvented? Observers have noted that “no country in the world has implemented an age-verification mandate without issue” (Guardian Australia, 2024).

Age verification raises significant privacy and security concerns. Methods such as ID checks, credit card verification, or biometric scans require the collection of sensitive personal information, while behavioural monitoring can track user activity online. Even with protections in place, storing and processing this data carries risks of breaches, misuse, or unintended profiling. Furthermore, verification systems can be circumvented by determined users, meaning younger individuals may still access platforms while others are exposed to intrusive data collection. These challenges highlight that age assurance measures involve a complex trade-off between protecting young people online and safeguarding their privacy.

An additional concern is that the law might simply displace, rather than reduce, risky behaviour: if under-16s are barred from mainstream platforms, they might migrate to less regulated or offshore platforms, ‘dark corners’ of the internet, or use proxy accounts (for example via older friends/family) that evade detection altogether. A social media age restriction could unintentionally drive offenders to adapt their behaviour and seek out platforms not covered by legislation. If popular, regulated platforms become inaccessible to younger users, offenders may migrate to smaller, less monitored

apps, private chat services, or encrypted messaging platforms where oversight is limited. This displacement can make harmful behaviours harder to detect and intervene in, as these alternative spaces often lack robust reporting mechanisms and safety protections. Consequently, while age restrictions aim to protect young people, they may inadvertently push risks into less visible and more challenging environments.

If social media access were delayed until age 16, parents and young people might miss critical opportunities to engage in online safety discussions during the formative early-teen years. Currently, conversations about privacy, digital footprints, and responsible online behaviour often begin when children first express interest in social platforms. A later age restriction could create a false sense of security, leading parents to postpone these discussions and leaving teens less prepared when they eventually gain access. As a result, young people might enter social media spaces with less guidance and fewer digital resilience skills, increasing potential risks once they come online independently.

Some commentators have raised concerns that the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024* may have unintended consequences for digital inclusion and youth autonomy. By restricting access to mainstream social media platforms for under-16s, the law could inadvertently limit young people's ability to participate in online peer networks, express their identities, and access information or communities that are beneficial for personal development and social support. These effects may be particularly pronounced for adolescents who are already socially isolated or belong to vulnerable populations, such as sexuality- or gender-diverse youth, or those experiencing mental health challenges. For these groups, online spaces can serve as critical venues for connection, identity exploration, and access to supportive communities that might not be available offline (Weir, 2023). If platforms over-apply age restrictions, or if age-assurance systems fail to distinguish between harmful and constructive social media use, these young people could be cut off from crucial social and emotional support networks, exacerbating feelings of isolation and marginalisation. Consequently, while the law aims to protect children from harm, it also raises complex questions about balancing safety with the developmental and social benefits of online engagement, highlighting the need for nuanced, evidence-based implementation that recognises the diverse needs of young users.

Bravehearts Position

Bravehearts recommends a proactive approach to the implementation of the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024*, which comes into effect 10 December 2025. This legislation, requiring platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter) to take "reasonable steps" to prevent accounts for children under 16, represents an important shift: the responsibility for safety is placed firmly on the platforms, rather than on young people or their families. While the effectiveness of this approach remains to be seen, the intention to give children more time to develop maturity, social-emotional skills, and resilience before full exposure to social media is a positive step.

Bravehearts encourages:

- Ongoing scrutiny and research to ensure these changes support child safety without unintended consequences. Key considerations include understanding how delayed access may impact digital equity, the potential for younger users to migrate to unregulated platforms, and the effectiveness and privacy implications of age verification measures.
- Review of whether entering social media at 16 fosters healthier usage patterns, critical thinking, and digital citizenship.
- Platforms to embrace Safety by Design principles, using these changes not merely to restrict access, but to reimagine systems that actively protect and empower children online. Safety by Design operates under three key principles: (1) Service provider responsibility, (2) User empowerment and autonomy and (3) Transparency and accountability.
- Concerted efforts to hold companies responsible for users' safety, placing a duty of care onto digital platforms for the wellbeing of their users, and requiring digital platforms to implement diligent risk assessments and risk mitigation plans to make their systems and processes safe for all Australians.
- Focus on digital literacy and good digital citizenship education to help develop skills that are needed to ensure positive and safe online behaviours and practices.

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